MILTON AS AN HISTORIAN

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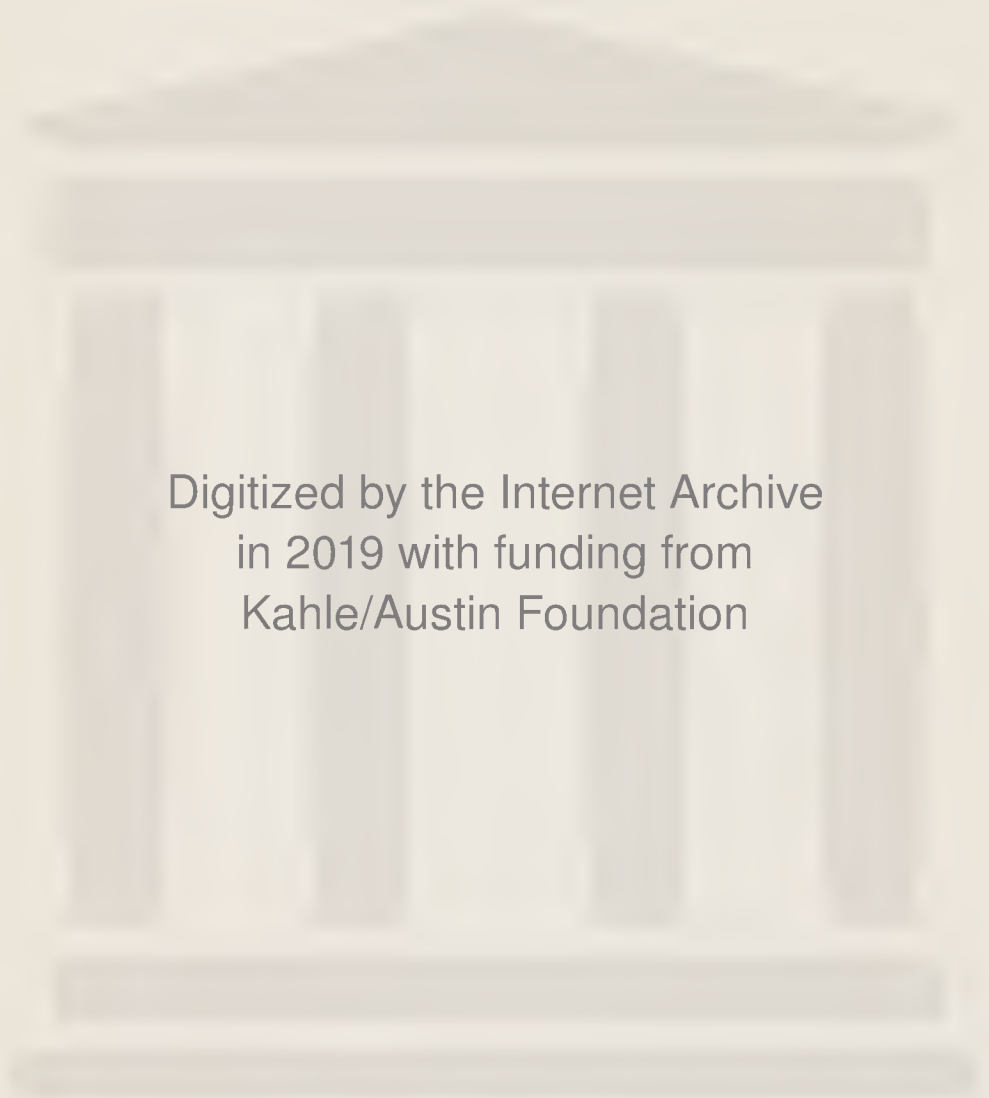
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Milton as an Historian

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Stow, and Speed,[1] as well as several foreign historians.[2] It is clear that at that time the 'first traditional beginning' of British history attracted him most, and twice in the Latin verses written during the year 1639 he expressed his resolve to make these legends the subject of an epic poem. In the *Epitaphium Damonis* he declared that his future theme should be the coming of the Trojans, and the fortunes of the line of Brutus:

> 'Ipse ego Dardanias Rutupina per aequora puppes
> Dicam, et Pandrasidos regnum vetus Inogeniae,
> Brennumque Arviragumque duces, priscumque Belinum,
> Et tandem Armoricos Britonum sub lege colonos;
> Tum gravidam Arturo fatali fraude Iögernen,
> Mendaces vultus, assumptaque Gorlois arma,
> Merlini dolus.'[3]

In the *Epistle to Mansus*, written a few months earlier, his chosen theme was to be the life of King Arthur:

> 'Si quando indigenas revocabo in carmina reges,
> Arturumque etiam sub terris bella moventem,
> Aut dicam invictae sociali foedere mensae
> Magnanimos Heroas et (O modo spiritus adsit)
> Frangam Saxonicas Britonum sub Marte phalanges.'[4]

Once more, in 1642, in his fourth pamphlet, he returned to his project. It was his purpose, he declared, to add to the fame of his native country by his writings. Hitherto its history had been meanly written. 'If the Athenians made their small deeds great and renowned by their eloquent writers, England hath had her noble achievements made small by the unskilful handling of monks and mechanics.'[5] To him it appeared that 'our own ancient stories' supplied fit matter for a poem, and he was deliberating over the

[1] *A Common-place Book of John Milton*, ed. by A. H. Horwood, pp. 9, 10, 22, 25, 27, 31; cf. Masson, *Life of Milton*, i. 303, 645, 736, vi. 790.

[2] In Milton's *Apology for Smectymnuus*, published in 1642, he speaks of his early historical reading: 'Some years I spent in stories of those Greek and Roman exploits, wherein I found many things both nobly done and worthily spoken.' He explains that when he came to the period of Constantine the Great the history of the Church proved intolerably repulsive. *Prose Works*, i. 269, 318.

[3] *Epitaphium Damonis*, ll. 162–8; Masson, *Life of Milton*, ii. 84–94. Dated by Masson about October, 1639.

[4] *Mansus*, ll. 80–4; Masson, *Life*, i. 524.

[5] Milton is here referring to an observation made by Sallust: 'Atheniensium res gestae, sicuti ego aestumo, satis amplae magnificaeque fuere, verum aliquanto minores tamen quam fama feruntur, sed quia provenere ibi scriptorum magna ingenia, per terrarum orbem Atheniensium facta pro maxumis celebrantur.' —Sallust, *Catiline*, 8.

question 'what king or knight before the Conquest might be chosen in whom to lay the pattern of a Christian hero.'[1]

One doubt, however, was still unresolved: whether it was best to adopt for his poem the epic or the dramatic form, and which of the two would be 'more doctrinal and exemplary' to his countrymen. For some time a tragedy with a chorus, after the antique model, had seemed the form best suited for his purpose, and about 1640 he jotted down on paper a long list of possible subjects, with brief notes as to the way of treating them. Of these subjects, numbering ninety-nine in all, sixty-one were scriptural and thirty-eight from British history, and it is noticeable that the subjects of the British tragedies were chosen not from the legendary period, but the times between the Roman conquest and the year 1066.[2]

None of these various schemes was realized in the form in which it was first conceived. The tragedy of 'Adam Unparadised' became ultimately the epic of *Paradise Lost*; the epic on Arthur and the 'British Tragedies' developed into the prose *History of Britain*.

We can trace with tolerable accuracy the progress of the *History of Britain*. Milton began to write it after the conclusion of the series of pamphlets on divorce (March 1645), and after the close of the first Civil War (June 1646). It is probable that by the end of 1647 he had completed the first and second books, since the original introduction to the third book must have been written, judging from its tone, about the close of 1647 or the beginning of 1648. It is certain, on Milton's own evidence, that by March 1649, when he became Secretary to the Council of State, he had finished four out of the six books, and had brought the story down to the union of England under the rule of Egbert. He tells us that he then intended to relate the history of England from its first beginnings to his own day.[3] But this intention was never fulfilled. At some period after 1649 Milton wrote the fifth and the sixth books, which contain the story of the Danish invasions and the Norman conquest, but he proceeded no further. His blindness proved no doubt too great an obstacle.[4]

[1] Masson, ii. 361, 385; *The Reason of Church Government urged against Prelaty. Prose Works*, i. 145.

[2] Ibid., 106; Aldis Wright, pp. 35, 36.

[3] He says: 'ad historiam gentis, ab ultima origine repetitam, ad haec usque tempora, si possem, perpetuo filo deducendam, me converti.' *Defensio Secunda*, Mitford's ed. of Milton's *Prose Works*, iv. 293.

[4] Milton probably resumed the *History of Britain* about the end of 1655, since he published his *Pro Se Defensio* in August 1655, and, having completed the Salmasius controversy, had time at his disposal. 'Being now quiet from State adversaries and public contests,' says Phillips, 'he had leisure again for his own studies and private designs.' In March 1657 he was inquiring about the cost of

The purpose which Milton set before himself when he began to write is clearly explained in the exordium to his *History*:

'The beginning of nations, those excepted of whom sacred books have spoken, is to this day unknown. Nor only the beginning, but the deeds of many succeeding ages, yea, periods of ages, either wholly unknown, or obscured and blemished with fables. . . . Of British affairs, from the first peopling of the island to the coming of Julius Caesar, nothing certain, either by tradition, history, or ancient fame, hath hitherto been left us. That which we have of oldest seeming, hath by the greater part of judicious antiquaries been long rejected for a modern fable.

'Nevertheless, there being others, besides the first supposed author, men not unread, nor unlearned in antiquity, who admit that for approved story which the former explode for fiction; and seeing that ofttimes relations heretofore accounted fabulous have been after found to contain in them many footsteps and reliques of something true, as what we read in poets of the flood, and giants little believed, till undoubted witnesses taught us that all was not feigned; I have therefore determined to bestow the telling over even of these reputed tales; be it for nothing else but in favour of our English poets and rhetoricians, who by their art will know how to use them judiciously.

'. . . I intend not with controversies and quotations to delay or interrupt the smooth course of history; much less to argue and debate long who were the first inhabitants, with what probabilities, what authorities each opinion hath been upheld; but shall endeavour that which hitherto hath been needed most, with plain and lightsome brevity, to relate well and orderly things worth the noting, so as may best instruct and benefit them that read.'[1]

It is evident that for the moment the truth of the facts related was less important in Milton's eyes than the manner in which they were related. History meant to him, when he began, merely the art of story-telling. As he hinted, the early history of England had been lengthily and tediously told in the ponderous volumes of his predecessors. In Holinshed's *Chronicle* 202 pages are required to reach the battle of Hastings, out of which 22 pages are devoted to the legendary period before the landing of Caesar. Speed expends

editions of Byzantine historians, which is evidence that his mind was once more turned to historical studies (see Masson, *Life of Milton*, v. 225, 284).

There is also another piece of evidence. On pp. 273, 287 of his *History* he refers to 'the Chronicle attributed to John Brompton, a Yorkshire Abbot, but rather of some nameless author living under Edward III or later'. This chronicle was first published in Twysden's *Decem Scriptores* in 1652 as 'Chronicon Johannis Brompton Abbatis Jorvalensis'. Milton no doubt used the edition of Simeon of Durham included in the same collection. He often refers to that author in the two latter books of the *History* and towards the end of Book IV.

[1] *History of Britain*, ed. 1670, pp. 1–3.

411 pages and 41 pages respectively on those two divisions of his subject.[1] Milton, on the other hand, contrives to cover the legendary period in 30 pages, and to complete his whole story in 308 pages, and these are quarto pages containing not much more than three hundred words, while the pages of Holinshed and Speed are folios printed in double columns. One page of Holinshed contains as many words as four pages of Milton, and in lightness of touch, as well as brevity, Milton as a story-teller exceeds either Holinshed, Speed, or Stow.

The legends which formed the staple of early British history had already been told and retold by many Elizabethan and Jacobean poets. Spenser in the second book of the *Faerie Queene* had versified in some six hundred lines the story of the landing of Brutus and the fortunes of his descendants up to Uther Pendragon.[2] Milton quotes a stanza from his version.[3] Drayton interspersed the thirty 'Songs' of his *Polyolbion*, wherever a legend could be localized, with narratives of British or Saxon monarchs which hill tells to hill and river certifies to river. In the first song of all the Dart claims the royalty of all the streams in the West because Brutus landed at her mouth, 'which now the envious world doth slander as a dream.'[4] It is to Drayton and Spenser that Milton alludes when he recites his story of the wrestling match between Corineus and the giant Goemagog, terming it 'a grand fable though dignified by our best poets'.[5]

Minor poets, too, had sought the same inexhaustible storehouse. Higgins, in his additions to *The Mirror for Magistrates* (1574), Warner in *Albion's England* (1586), Heywood in *Troja Britannica* (1609), and Slatyer in *Palaeo-Albion* (1621), all had found material for their art in the mythical history of Britain. Nor had the dramatists, from the author of *Gorboduc* to the author of *Lear* and *Cymbeline*, been behindhand in employing plots from the same source in tragedies or chronicle plays. Whether Milton believed these stories or not, their familiarity and their attractiveness made it impossible for him to pass them over in silence.

[1] The computation is based on the edition of Holinshed of 1586, and the 1632 edition of Speed. Milton, as his Common-place Book shows, used this edition of Holinshed and the 1631 edition of Stow.

[2] Book II, canto x.

[3] Ibid., x, l. 212; *History of Britain*, p. 16.

[4] *Polyolbion*, ed. 1613, p. 8. Drayton is a convinced believer in the Brutus legend. Selden, in the notes, argues for it 'as an advocate for the Muse', but not 'if alleged for my own opinion'. See pp. 17, 93, 162, and the address 'from the author of the Illustrations' prefixed.

[5] *History of Britain*, p. 13; *Faerie Queene*, II. x. 92; *Polyolbion*, p. 12.

Moreover, they had a great attraction for Milton himself, even if his judgement rejected them as fictitious. In *Comus* he had already utilized the story of Sabrina, the 'virgin daughter of Locrine', who gave her name to the Severn, and he now told it once more in prose.[1] The space devoted in the *History of Britain* to the story of Lear and Cordelia is probably a tribute to Shakespeare, but the two pages devoted to kings Brennus and Belinus must be explained by the fact that they were to have been personages in the intended epic.[2]

It is not only by his treatment of the mythical period of English history that Milton's interest in the legendary and anecdotic side of history is revealed. It appears in the later books as well as the earlier, and the introduction of certain episodes or the space devoted to them may often be explained by their inclusion in the list of suggested subjects for his 'British Tragedies'. The story of Queen Eadburga, the vision of King Edwin, Athelstan's murder of his brother and his repentance, are cases in point.[3] But the most remarkable instance is the narrative of King Edgar's marriage with Elfrida, and of another love adventure of that king's which Milton himself styles 'fitter for a novel than a history'.[4] 'Edgar slaying Ethelwold for false play in wooing' had once seemed a good plot for a tragedy. 'Wherein,' noted Milton, 'may be set out his pride and lust, which he thought to cloak by favouring monks and building monasteries; also the disposition of woman in Elfrida towards her husband.'[5]

Another episode treated at somewhat disproportionate length is that of the murder of Aelfred, the second son of Ethelred the Unready, which some authorities attributed to the treachery of Earl Godwin. The explanation of the space given to the story, and of the elaboration with which the statements of conflicting authors about it are set forth, appears to be that Milton once intended to make it the starting-point of a classical tragedy. The first scene of the tragedy of Harold, he had noted, 'may begin with the ghost of Alfred . . . slain in cruel manner by Godwin, Harold's father, his mother and brother dissuading him.'[6]

Here and elsewhere throughout the *History of Britain* the influence of Holinshed's *Chronicle* is plainly perceptible. Alike in the ancedotes inserted and the ancedotes omitted, Milton usually

[1] *Comus*, ll. 824–937; *History of Britain*, p. 15.
[2] Ibid., pp. 17, 22.
[3] Ibid., pp. 184, 224, 289.
[4] Ibid., p. 239.
[5] Masson, *Life of Milton*, ii. 114.
[6] Ibid., p. 114; *History of Britain*, p. 274.

follows in the track of Holinshed (or rather of Abraham Fleming, who wrote that part of Holinshed's compilation). For instance, under the reign of Edward the Confessor Milton relates the stories of the divine judgement upon Godwin, the soldierly death of Siward, and the prophetic vision of Edward the Confessor;[1] all these are to be found in Holinshed, but none of them in Speed or Stow. Similarly, Milton omits the story of Alfred and the cakes, which is omitted by Holinshed though it is told both by Stow and Speed. In the first book of the *History of Britain* the author's obligations to Holinshed are still more evident, nor is it by a mere coincidence that the first sentence of one is an echo of the second sentence in the other. 'The beginning of nations, those excepted of whom sacred books have spoken, is to this day unknown,' writes Milton. 'The original in manner of all nations is doubtful,' wrote the chronicler, 'and even the same for the most part fabulous, that always excepted, which we find in the Holy Scriptures.'[2]

On the other hand, Milton's was too vigorous and too independent a mind to adopt implicitly the conclusions of any previous writer. He had read Stow and Speed as well as Holinshed, and seems from his notes to have compared their narratives. At a later stage he read what original authorities he could obtain for the period from the coming of the Romans to the Norman Conquest, and tested the statements of the chroniclers by their aid. Many statements and theories which the chroniclers had accepted he dismissed as unfounded or improbable when he came to write.

Holinshed (or rather Abraham Fleming) begins the history of Britain, about the time of the flood, with the rule of Samothes, the sixth son of Japhet, and his sons, and the subjugation of the island about three hundred years later by the giant Albion, the son of Neptune. Milton, with Stow and Speed, rejects this story, calling it 'an outlandish figment', and condemning 'those of our own writers who thought they had done nothing unless with all circumstance they tell us when and who first set foot upon this island.'[3]

Holinshed and Stow both accept with implicit faith the Brutus legend. The latter intercalates in his narrative 'A briefe Proofe of Brute', showing how many learned men affirm this history, and denounces Polydore Vergil for denying it. This man, he complains, 'with one dash of a pen cashiereth three score princes with all their

[1] *History of Britain*, pp. 290, 291, 298.
[2] Ibid., p. 1. Holinshed, ed. 1587; Bk. I, p. 1.
[3] Ibid., p. 4.

histories and historians; yea, and some ancient laws also.'[1] On the other hand, Speed states, with convincing clearness and great elaboration, the arguments against the legend. 'As France,' he concludes, 'hath cast off their Francio king Priamus his son, Scotland their Scotia king Pharoes' daughter, Denmark their Danus, Ireland their Hiberus, and other countries their demigods, so let Britaines likewise with them disclaim their Brute.'[2]

Milton endeavours to hold the balance between absolute credulity and complete rejection. He will not follow Speed the whole way:

'Of Brutus and his line with the whole progeny of kings, to the entrance of Julius Caesar, we cannot so easily be discharged; descents of ancestry, long continued, laws and exploits not seeming to be borrowed or devised, which on the common belief have wrought no small impression; defended by many, denied utterly by few. For what though Brutus and the whole Trojan pretence were yielded up . . . yet those old and inborn names of successive kings, never any to have been real persons, or done in their lives at least some part of what so long hath been remembered, cannot be thought without too strict an incredulity.

'For these, and those causes above mentioned, that which hath received approbation from many, I have chosen not to omit. Certain or uncertain, be that upon the credit of those whom I must follow; so far as keeps aloof from impossible and absurd, attested by ancient writers from books more ancient, I refuse not, as the due and proper subject of story.'[3]

Another series of legends clustered round the introduction of Christianity into Britain. It was said that Simon Zelotes or Joseph of Arimathaea had preached Christianity in this country during the reign of Nero, and that about the year 177 when Lucius was king of Britain the whole island accepted the faith. A letter of Pope Eleutherius to the king was quoted in support of the facts; Lucius was canonized as the first British saint, and it became the accepted belief of English historians that the British nation was the first to make public profession of Christianity. Holinshed, Stow, and even the critical Speed, with some differences as to the details, all accepted these stories. Milton relates them, but he does so with obvious scepticism, and concludes: 'Of these matters, variously written and believed, ecclesiastic historians can best determine: as the best of them do, with little credit given to such uncertain relations.'[4]

[1] Stow's *Chronicle*, ed. 1631, p. 6 and preface. [2] Speed, pp. 14–20.

[3] *History of Britain*, p. 6.

[4] Ibid., p. 80; Holinshed, i. 37, 51; Speed, pp. 73–81, 103; Stow, p. 38. Fuller, *Church History*, ed. 1655, p. 9. Milton was indifferent to this claim,

Milton shows the same scepticism about the popular belief that Constantine the Great was of British descent. 'There goes a fame,' he says, 'and that seconded by most of our own historians, though not those the ancientest, that Constantine was born in this island, his mother Helena the daughter of Coilus, a British prince.' He proceeds to point out a few improbabilities, and to summarize the evidence of the Roman authorities against it. Here again he is more difficult to satisfy than Speed, who accepts the tradition, quoting, in answer to unbelievers, the opinion of 'Time's chief secretary, the learned Camden' in its favour.[1]

Milton's treatment of the Arthurian legend is a still more interesting example of the progress of scepticism. The three chroniclers who were the standard historians of Milton's time all doubted the details of the legend, but believed that Arthur was a real king who gained genuine victories. 'Of this Arthur,' says Holinshed's *Chronicle*, 'many things are written beyond credit, for that there is no ancient author of authority that confirmeth the same; but surely as may be thought he was some worthy man, and by all likelihood a great enemy to the Saxons, by reason whereof the Welshmen, which are the very Britons indeed, have him in famous remembrance.' Then at great length he relates the legendary life and exploits of the hero.[2]

Stow is briefer, but adopts much the same position. 'Of this Arthur there be many fabulous reports, but certain he was (saith William of Malmesbury) a prince more worthy to have advancement by true histories than false fables, being the only prop and upholder of his country.' He supports the truth of the story by identifying the sites of Mon Badonicus and the Castle of Camelot, and describing the remains found there.[3] The critical Speed quotes Malmesbury

holding it a greater glory that Wicliffe, the beginner of the Reformation, was an Englishman: 'England having had this grace and honour from God to be the first that should set up a standard for the recovery of lost truth, and blow the first evangelic trumpet to the nations.' *Of Reformation, Prose Works*, i. 5. Archbishop Parker firmly believed in the Lucius legend, and also did Cardinal Pole; Strype's *Parker*, i. 139, 467; iii. 247.

[1] *History of Britain*, p. 89; Speed, p. 156; Holinshed, pp. 62, 63. Gibbon summarizes the question in a sentence: 'This tradition, unknown to the contemporaries of Constantine, was invented in the darkness of the monasteries, was embellished by Jeffrey of Monmouth and the writers of the twelfth century, has been defended by our antiquarians of the last age, and is seriously related in the ponderous history of England compiled by Mr. Carte' (vol. i, p. 147).—*Decline and Fall*, ed. Bury, p. 397.

[2] Holinshed, i. 90–3.

[3] Stow, pp. 53–5.

too, and condemns Geoffrey of Monmouth for discrediting the truth about Arthur by his toys and tales. 'Of his person,' he concludes, 'we make no doubt, though his acts have been written with too lavish a pen.'[1]

Milton is much more thoroughgoing. All that happened about that time is doubtful. 'The age whereof we now write hath had the ill hap more than any since the first fabulous times, to be surcharged with all the idle fancies of posterity.' He introduces Arthur by describing him as a British leader, 'more renowned in songs and romances than true stories.' With real insight he dismisses at once the mediaeval fictions and examines the account of Nennius as the only evidence of any real value:

'Who Arthur was, and whether ever any such reigned in Britain, hath been doubted heretofore, and may again with good reason. For the monk of Malmesbury and others, whose credit hath swayed most with the learneder sort, we may well perceive to have known no more of this Arthur five hundred years past, nor of his doings, than we now living; and what they had to say, transcribed out of Nennius, a very trivial writer yet extant, which hath already been related; or out of a British book, the same which he of Monmouth set forth, utterly unknown to the world, till more than six hundred years after the days of Arthur, of whom (as Sigebert in his chronicle confesses) all other histories were silent, both foreign and domestic, except only that fabulous book. Others of later time have sought to assert him by old legends and cathedral regests. But he who can accept of legends for good story, may quickly swell a volume with trash, and had need be furnished with two only necessaries, leisure and belief; whether it be the writer, or he that shall read.'[2]

'As to Arthur,' he continues, 'no less is in doubt who was his father,' and then proceeds to demolish Uther Pendragon: 'And as we doubted of his parentage, so may we also of his puissance; for whether that victory at Badon-hill were his or no is uncertain.' All he will concede is that, 'whether by Arthur won, or whensoever,' that battle 'seems indeed to have given a most undoubted and important blow to the Saxons and to have stopped their proceedings for a good while after.'[3]

When we compare Milton's treatment of this with that of Holinshed, Stow, and Speed, his superiority is evident. Alter the phraseology, and he might have been writing in the nineteenth rather than the seventeenth century. For his conclusions are roughly those

[1] Speed, p. 271.

[2] *History of Britain*, p. 122.

[3] Ibid., pp. 119, 122, 124.

of modern scholars, and his reasoning practically that of a scientific historian.[1]

Here, as in many other places, Milton's *History* helps to explain his poetry. One of the reasons for the abandonment of the intended epic on the story of Arthur was that his studies had convinced him there was no more truth in it than there was in the story of Brutus. When he referred later to the Arthurian legends he was careful to emphasize their fictitious character. He speaks of

> 'What resounds
> In fable or romance of Uther's son,
> Begirt with British and Armoric knights':

or of

> 'Ladies that seemed
> Fairer than feigned of old, or fabled since
> Of faery damsels met in forest wide
> By knights of Logres, or of Lyones,
> Lancelot, or Pelleas, or Pellenore.'[2]

It was not in these legends of 'fabled knights' and 'battles feigned' that he could find the substance of his 'heroic song',[3] nor was it through them that he could convey the ethical teaching which it was the office of the poet to give.

As we have already pointed out, Milton's *History* is not entirely a compilation from the standard historians of his day, but is also based upon a considerable study of the original sources accessible when he wrote. He begins by endeavouring to form an opinion of the value of the authorities for each particular period taken collectively, and supplements this by incidental estimates of individual authors.

For the legends of the prae-Roman period he says at the outset: 'The principal author is well known to be Geoffrey of Monmouth; what he was and whence his authority, who in his age or before him have delivered the same matter, and such like general discourses, will better stand in a treatise by themselves.'[4] The treatise was never written, but we can gather Milton's opinion of Geoffrey's credibility from his rejection of his statements, and from disparaging references to his fables and untruths.[5] Authentic history, Milton declares at the close of his first book, begins with the coming of the Romans.

[1] Hodgkin, *Political History of England*, i. 104–5, 107; Ramsay, *Foundations of England*, i. 124–5, 135.

[2] *Paradise Lost*, i. 579; *Paradise Regained*, ii. 357.

[3] *Paradise Lost*, ix. 27–40.

[4] *History of Britain*, p. 6.

[5] Ibid., pp. 24, 28, 47, 54, 79, 84, 103, 144.

'By this time, like one who had set out on his way by night, and travelled through a region of smooth or idle dreams, our history now arrives on the confines where daylight and truth meet us with a clear dawn, representing to our view, though at a far distance, true colours and shapes. For albeit Caesar, whose authority we are now first to follow, wanted not who taxed him of misrepresenting in his Commentaries, yea, in his Civil War against Pompey, much more, may we think, in the British affairs, of whose little skill in writing he did not easily hope to be contradicted; yet now in such variety of good authors, we hardly can miss, from one hand or other, to be sufficiently informed, as of things past so long ago.'[1]

'... The only authors we have of British matters while the power of Rome reached hither' are Roman authors 'who in the Latin tongue have laid together as much and perhaps more than was required to a history of Britain.' The story they tell is 'a story of much truth', and for the first hundred years and more it may be 'collected without much labour'. For the most part 'little seems to be required above transcription', although something may be added by diligence and explained by the arrangement of the facts. Towards the end of the period, however, 'the Roman empire declining apace, good historians growing scarce or lost, have left us little but fragments for many years ensuing.'[2]

When the Roman empire fell, darkness settled down again; learning and history, and even language itself, decayed with it:

'Henceforth we are to steer by another sort of authors; near enough to the things they write, as in their own country, if that would serve; in time not much belated, some of equal age; in expression barbarous, and to say how judicious, I suspend awhile: this we must expect; in civil matters to find them dubious relaters, and still to the best advantage of what they term the Holy Church, meaning indeed themselves: in most other matters of religion, blind, astonished, and struck with superstition as with a planet; in one word, Monks. Yet these guides, where can be had no better, must be followed; in gross, it may be true enough; in circumstances each man, as his judgement gives him, may reserve his faith, or bestow it.'[3]

One of these monks was Bede, the chief authority, says Milton, for the period from the coming of the Saxons to 731, but even he could not make it intelligible:

'Beda surceased to write. Out of whom chiefly has been gathered, since the Saxon's arrival, such as hath been delivered, a scattered story picked out here and there, with some trouble and tedious work, from among his many legends of visions and miracles; toward the

[1] *History of Britain*, p. 29. [2] Ibid., pp. 31, 33, 84. [3] Ibid., p. 97.

latter end so bare of civil matters, as what can be thence collected may seem a calendar rather than a history, taken up for the most part with succession of kings, and a computation of years, yet those hard to be reconciled with the Saxon annals. Their actions we read of were most commonly wars, but for what cause waged, or by what councils carried on, no care was had to let us know; whereby their strength and violence we understand, of their wisdom, reason, or justice, little or nothing, the rest superstition and monastical affectation; kings one after another leaving their kingly charge, to run their heads fondly into a monk's cowl; which leaves us uncertain whether Beda was wanting to his matter, or his matter to him.'[1]

Yet whatever Bede's defects might be he was a better guide than the authors on whom it was necessary to depend for the following period:

'From hence to the Danish invasion it will be worse with us, destitute of Beda. Left only to obscure and blockish chronicles; whom Malmesbury, and Huntingdon (for neither they nor we had better authors of those times), ambitious to adorn the history, make no scruple ofttimes, I doubt, to interline with conjectures and surmises of their own; them rather than imitate, I shall choose to represent the truth naked, though as lean as a plain journal. Yet William of Malmesbury must be acknowledged, both for style and judgement, to be by far the best writer of them all; but what labour is to be endured turning over volumes of rubbish in the rest, Florence of Worcester, Huntingdon, Simeon of Durham, Hoveden, Matthew of Westminster, and many others of obscurer note, with all their monachisms, is a penance to think. Yet these are our only registers, transcribers one after another for the most part, and sometimes worthy enough of the things they register. This travail, rather than not to know at once what may be known of our ancient story, sifted from fables and impertinences, I voluntarily undergo; and to save others, if they please, the like unpleasing labour.'[2]

At intervals during the later part of his narrative Milton characterizes or criticizes particular authors more fully. Malmesbury, though the best, had other defects besides those mentioned. 'He refused not the authority of ballads for want of better' and inserted stories he confessed 'to be sung in old songs not read in warrantable authors'.[3] Besides, he was too much biased in favour of monks and kings who loved monks, and against the secular clergy. Henry of Huntingdon was not to be trusted unless he was confirmed by some other authority: 'little credit is to be placed in Huntingdon single.' He was too imaginative. 'His manner is to comment upon the Annal text' (that is, the *Saxon Chronicle*) and to add fictitious details of the

[1] *History of Britain*, p. 172. [2] Ibid. [3] Ibid., pp. 224, 229.

events recorded 'describing the manner of those battles and encounters, which they who compare and can judge of books may be confident he never found in any current author whom he had to follow'.[1]

Of the value of the 'Saxon Annals', as Milton terms the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, he has a very just conception. 'These I take . . . to be the chief foundation of our story, the ground and basis upon which the monks in later times gloss and comment at their pleasure.' But to understand them and make out the real significance of the Annals was a very difficult task. Sometimes their record of events was 'without coherence of sense or story'. Alfred's wars with the Danes 'are set down so perplexedly by the Saxon annalist, ill gifted with utterance, as with much ado can be understood sometimes what is spoken of whether meant of the Danes or of the Saxons'. For instance, it is impossible to say who won the battle of Merton, 'so darkly do the Saxon Annals deliver their meaning with more than wonted infancy.' Poetical passages, such as the ballads on the battles of Brunanburh and Maldon completely baffled and somewhat enraged Milton. Of the former he says: 'The Saxon annalist, wont to be sober and succinct, whether the same or another writer, now labouring under the weight of his argument, and overcharged, runs on a sudden into such extravagant fancies and metaphors as bear him quite beside the scope of being understood. . . . I shall only sum up what of him I can attain in usual language.'[2]

Milton endeavoured to supplement the scantiness of the English sources by the help of foreign historians, but got little satisfaction from them. He searched the *Rerum Danicarum Historia* of J. J. Pontanus for information about the Danish invasion, but found nothing of any value. As to the ninth century 'of all these terrible landings and devastations by the Danes . . . or of their leaders whether kings, dukes, or earls, the Danish history of best credit saith nothing; so little wit or conscience they had to leave any memory of their brutish rather than manly actions'. As to the tenth century: 'The Danish history, at least their latest and diligentest historian, as neither from the first landing of the Danes, in the reign of West Saxon Brithric, so now again contributed nothing; busied more than enough to make out the bare names and successors of their uncertain kings, and their small actions at home; unless out of him I should transcribe what he takes, and I better may, from our own annals.'[3]

[1] *History of Britain*, pp. 122, 175, 211. [2] Ibid., pp. 203, 211, 212, 225.
[3] Ibid., pp. 179, 192, 244.

When Milton turned to the Scottish historians for facts about the invasion of the Picts and Scots the result was still more disappointing, for he found nothing but pure fiction. George Buchanan, he complains, in his *Rerum Scoticarum Historia*, 'departs not much from the fables of his predecessor Boethius' (i. e. Hector Boece); 'with no less exactness of particular circumstances he takes upon him to relate all those tumultuary inroads of the Scots and Picts into Britain, as if they had but yesterday happened, their order of battle, manner of fight, number of slain, articles of peace, things whereof Gildas and Beda are utterly silent, authors to whom the Scotch writers have none to cite comparable in antiquity; no more therefore to be believed for bare assertions, however quaintly dressed, than our Geoffrey of Monmouth, when he varies most from authentic story. But either the inbred vanity of some, in that respect unworthily called historians, or the fond zeal of praising their nations above truth, hath so far transported them, that where they find nothing faithfully to relate, they fall confidently to invent what they think may either best set off their history, or magnify their country.' It was amusing when 'our neighbour historian' gravely reprehended Geoffrey of Monmouth and others 'for fabling in the deeds of Arthur; yet what he writes thereof himself as of better credit, shows not whence he had but from those fables which he seems content to believe in part on condition that the Scots and Picts may be thought to have assisted Arthur in all his wars and achievements; whereof appears as little ground by credible story as of that which he most counts for fabulous'.[1]

Another modern author of whom Milton made constant use was Camden. Whenever the locality of a battle had to be fixed, or the modern name of a place given, it was naturally to Camden's *Britannia* that he turned. The spot where Caesar landed, the ford by which he crossed the Thames, the site of the camp of Caractacus, the position of the Roman wall, and other topographical facts mentioned were all derived from the same source. These questions of identification did not interest Milton much; he contented himself with briefly giving the necessary minimum of information on such points without interrupting the narrative by discussions. If they could not be identified he preferred to omit them. He did not care, he said, 'to wrinkle the smoothness of history with the rugged names of places unknown better harped at in Camden and other chorographers'.[2]

[1] *History of Britain*, pp. 103, 126, 185.

[2] Ibid., pp. 36, 45, 56, 77, 78, 83, 160, 178. Milton also refers to Spelman's *Concilia*, p. 143.

Milton's method of combining and comparing the statements he found in the various authorities he used deserves notice. At the outset he had declared 'I intend not with controversies and quotations to interrupt the smooth course of history.'[1] But these words referred, as the context shows and his later practice proves, merely to the legendary period covered in the first book. He declined to waste labour 'in computing or collating years and chronologies' when he was dealing with the reigns of the progeny of Brutus, because it was absurd 'to be vainly curious about the time and circumstances of things, whereof the substance is so much in doubt'.[2] In the later books where his authorities were more trustworthy and he was dealing with historical events, it was worth while to discuss dates, to point out discrepancies, and to attempt to reconcile statements. The task, he admitted, was laborious, but he did not shrink from it. 'This travail, rather than not to know at once what may be known of our ancient story, sifted from fables and impertinences, I voluntarily undergo; and to save others, if they please, the like unpleasing labour.'[3]

Milton's favourite method, in the later books, is to place the different stories of his authorities side by side, and conclude by saying which account seems most probable. For instance, in relating the division of England between Canute and Edmund Ironside, he summarizes first Malmesbury's account, then that of Huntingdon, finally that of Matthew of Westminster. As to the accession of Edward the Confessor he gives the versions of Huntingdon, Malmesbury, and Brompton in succession, prefacing them with the remark, 'It may seem a wonder that our historians, if they deserve the name, should in a matter so remarkable and so near their own time so much differ.' He inclines to accept William of Malmesbury's version. In another instance, dealing with Harold's visit to William of Normandy, he sets side by side the statements of five authors, Malmesbury, Ingulf, Eadmer, Simeon of Durham, and Matthew Paris. 'So variously are these things reported' that he finds it impossible to decide.[4]

Incidentally he criticizes with some acuteness Ingulf's story, for, like seventeenth-century historians in general, he accepted his Chronicle of Croyland as a genuine authority. Ingulf had said that Edward the Confessor sent Robert Archbishop of Canterbury to acquaint Duke William with his intention of bequeathing the English crown to him. 'The former part may be true that King Edward upon such considerations had sent one or other, but Archbishop Robert was fled the land, and dead many years before.'[5] In the same way Milton

[1] *History of Britain*, p. 3. [2] Ibid., p. 29. [3] Ibid., p. 173.
[4] Ibid., pp. 265, 278, 295. [5] Ibid., p. 296.

rejects a statement of Simeon of Durham's which describes Uthred, son of the Earl of Northumberland, as fighting against Malcolm of Scotland: 'Here Simeon the relater seems to have committed some mistake, having slain Uthred by Canute two years before and set Eric in his place: Eric therefore it needs must be, not Uthred, who managed this war against the Scots'.[1]

Milton's wide reading showed him that some of the statements he found in his authorities were merely conventional imitations of earlier historians. Speaking of the omens which accompanied William's landing on the English shore, he says, 'These things are related of Alexander and Caesar, and I doubt thence borrowed by the monks to inlay their story.'[2] At other times his good sense prevented him from believing implicitly what others had been content to accept on authority. Holinshed and Speed, for instance, repeat as a fact Malmesbury's statement that the English in Edgar's time owed their vices to 'the too much resort of strangers' to the country, learning rudeness of 'the outlandish Saxons', daintiness of the Flemings, and drunkenness of the Danes. 'I doubt,' comments Milton, 'these vices are as naturally home-bred here as in any of those countries.'[3]

Yet Milton, to use his own phrase, was not 'of too strict an incredulity', and tells us a few lines further, on the authority of Ingulf, 'This year died Swarling, a monk of Croyland, in the hundred and forty-second year of his age, and another soon after him in the hundred and fifteenth; in that fenny and waterish air the more remarkable.'[4]

To conclude this discussion of Milton's treatment of his authorities and his relation to previous historians.

It seems plain that Professor Masson went too far when he described the *History of Britain* as 'not a work of real research or criticism', but 'a mere popular compilation of such matter as was easily at hand'.[5] Milton aimed higher and achieved more than this verdict admits. There is some attempt both at research and at criticism in the book. Milton frequently shows a very true conception of the value of the evidence at his disposal, as well as the independence of judgement one naturally expects from him.

The style also possesses the individuality which marks all Milton's writings. The earlier books are more carefully finished than the later ones. In books four and six Milton seems somewhat weary of his task; he is less attentive to the arrangement of his matter

[1] *History of Britain*, p. 269.
[2] Ibid., p. 303.
[3] Ibid., p. 235.
[4] Ibid., p. 235.
[5] *Life of Milton*, vi. 644.

or the effective statement of what he has to say. In the early part of the *History* he relates a story or describes a scene with a certain deliberate care—not only with touches that reveal the poet, but in the more highly-wrought passages with a certain sententious brevity entirely unlike the fervid and unrestrained diction of his first prose pamphlets. The explanation of this change of style is to be found in Milton's theory of the manner in which history should be written.

His views on the nature of historical writing in general are set forth in two passages in the *History*.

Every age, Milton hints, obtained the historians it deserved, for there was a close relation between the deeds and the written records of the deeds. In certain times, what happened was hardly worth recording. 'Ofttime we see that wise men, and of best ability, have forborn to write the acts of their own days, while they beheld with a just loathing and disdain, not only how unworthy, how perverse, how corrupt, but often how ignoble, how petty, how below all history, the persons and their actions were; who, either by fortune or some rude election, had attained, as a sore judgement and ignominy upon the land, to have chief sway in managing the commonwealth.'[1] Even then there were historians of a sort. 'It is true that in obscurest times, by shallow and unskilful writers, the indistinct noise of many battles and devastations of many kingdoms, overrun and lost, hath come to our ears.' But in such periods of decay true history was hardly possible; and good historians were discouraged. 'When the esteem of science and liberal study waxes low in the commonwealth, we may presume that also there all civil virtue and worthy action is grown as low to a decline: and then eloquence, as it were consorted in the same destiny, with the decrease and fall of virtue, corrupts also and fades; at least resigns her office of relating to illiterate and frivolous historians, such as the persons themselves both deserve, and are best pleased with; whilst they want either the understanding to choose better or the innocence to dare invite the examining and searching style of an intelligent and faithful writer to the survey of their unsound exploits, better befriended by obscurity than fame.'[2]

On the other hand, 'worthy deeds are not often destitute of worthy relaters, as, by a certain fate, great acts and great eloquence have most commonly gone hand in hand, equalling and honouring each other in the same ages.' For great men knew that history was necessary to their greatness.

[1] *History of Britain*, p. 2.

[2] Ibid., p. 32.

'He whose just and true valour uses the necessity of war and dominion not to destroy, but to prevent destruction, to bring in liberty against tyrants, law and civility among barbarous nations, knowing that when he conquers all things else, he cannot conquer Time or Detraction, wisely conscious of this his want, as well as of his worth not to be forgotten or concealed, honours and hath recourse to the aid of eloquence, his friendliest and best supply; by whose immortal record his noble deeds, which else were transitory, becoming fixed and durable against the force of years and generations, he fails not to continue through all posterity, over Envy, Death and Time also victorious.'[1]

As to the manner in which the historian should relate the deeds he undertook to record, Milton set forth his views in two letters to a young foreign scholar, Henry de Brass.[2]

The model for all historical writers was Sallust. The man who appreciated Sallust had made no small progress in the art of history.[3] 'Dicam libere . . . Sallustium cuivis Latino historico me quidem anteferre; quae etiam constans fere Antiquorum sententia fuit. Habet suas laudes tuus Tacitus; sed eas meo quidem iudicio maximas, quod Sallustium nervis omnibus sit imitatus.' He proceeds then to explain his view of what Sallust meant when he said 'facta dictis exaequanda sunt'.

'Ego vero sic existimo; qui gestas res dignas digne scripserit, eum animo non minus magno rerumque usu praeditum scribere oportet, quam is qui eas gesserit; ut vel maximas pari animo comprehendere atque metiri possit, et comprehensas sermone puro atque casto graviterque narrare: nam ut ornate non admodum laboro; Historicum enim non Oratorem requiro. . . . Addiderim et illud Sallustianum, qua in re ipse Catonem maxime laudavit, posse multa paucis absolvere; id quod sine acerrimo iudicio, atque etiam temperantia quadam neminem posse arbitror. Sunt multi in quibus vel sermonis elegantiam vel congestarum rerum copiam non desideres; qui brevitatem cum copia coniunxerit, id est, qui multa paucis absolverit, princeps meo iudicio Latinorum est Sallustius. Has ego virtutes Historico inesse putem oportere, qui facta dictis exaequaturum se speret.'[4]

This 'Sallustiana brevitas' as Quintilian terms it, Milton endeavours to imitate, not only in certain highly-wrought passages, but in the pregnant or picturesque phrases interspersed through his narrative.

[1] *History of Britain*, pp. 31–3.

[2] *Ioannis Miltoni Angli Epistolarum Familiarum Liber Unus*, 1674, pp. 53, 58; and *Prose Works*, v. 401, 405. See Masson, *Life of Milton*, v. 363, 379. The letters are dated July 15 and December 16, 1657.

[3] 'Sciat se haud parum in re Historica profecisse, cui placeat Sallustius.'

[4] *Epistolae*, pp. 54–5.

Take, for instance, his summary of the results of the Roman Conquest. 'Of the Romans we have cause not to say much worse, than that they beat us into some civility'.[1] Or his comment on the attempt of Ethelred to buy off the Danes. 'The king and his courtiers . . . send now the fourth time to buy a dishonourable peace, every time still dearer (for the Danes knew how to milk such easy kine).' Or his description of the incursions of the Danes 'sallying forth out of their ships as out of savage dens' to plunder, and then 'like wild beasts glutted returned to their caves'. To vary the phrase in a second case he says 'or rather sea monsters to their water-stables'.[2]

The same quality marks some of Milton's characters of persons. He describes Carausius as usurping the government because he 'was grown at length too great a delinquent to be less than an emperor', and Vortigern as a tyrant who was 'yet of the people much beloved, because his vices sorted so well with theirs'.[3] At times this attempt to put much meaning into few words produces obscurity. At other times it results in something like conceits; as when he describes the Britons 'with a stern compassion' slaying their wives and children to prevent them from falling into the hands of the Romans, or a Dane 'with a pious impiety' killing Archbishop Alfage in order to put an end to his sufferings.[4]

In one passage of his letters to Henry de Brass Milton lays down another prineiple which should be observed in historical writing. 'Crebras etiam sententias, et iudicia de rebus gestis interiecta prolixe nollem, ne, interrupta rerum serie, quod Politici Scriptoris munus est Historicus invadat; qui si in consiliis explicandis factisque enarrandis, non suum ingenium aut coniecturam, sed veritatem potissimum sequitur, suarum profecto partium satagit.' But he is far from following this counsel himself. It is true he does not insert many general reflections, but there are a few. On the Britons calling the Saxons to help them against the Picts and Scots he observes: 'So much do men through impatience count ever that the heaviest which they bear at present, and to remove the evil which they suffer, care not to pull on a greater; as if variety and change in evil also were acceptable'.[5] When he relates the repentance of Canute and his resolve to make amends to his people, he adds: 'It is a fond conceit in many great ones, and pernicious in the end, to cease from no violence till they have attained the end of

[1] *History of Britain*, p. 49.
[2] Ibid., pp. 252, 255.
[3] Ibid., pp. 86, 109.
[4] Ibid., pp. 76, 256.
[5] Ibid., p. 110.

their ambitions and desires; then to think God appeased by seeking to bribe him with a share, however large, of their illgotten spoils; and then, lastly, to grow zealous of doing right, when they have no longer need to do wrong.'[1]

But generally Milton's comments are not so much to the point: on the contrary, they are as far away from it as possible. He inserts reflections of every kind. Some are references to contemporary manners. When he describes the ancient Britons as 'painting their own skins with several portraitures of beast, bird, or flower', he adds, 'a vanity which hath not yet left us, removed only from the skin to the skirt, behung now with as many coloured ribbands and gewgaws'.[2] Others contain references to contemporary politics. Having to mention the expedition sent by a Northumbrian king to Ireland, he introduces an allusion to the Irish massacres in 1641: 'A harmless nation, saith Beda, and ever friendly to the English; in both which they seem to have left a posterity much unlike them at this day.'[3] Milton's comments continually remind us that he held very strong views about the subjection of women. He is as bitter against 'the monstrous regiment of women' as John Knox himself. Cordelia's nephews rebel against her in spite of her virtues, 'not bearing that a kingdom should be governed by a woman,' and Cartismandua is dethroned by the Britons, not because of her crimes, but on account of 'the uncomeliness of their subjection to the monarchy of a woman'.[4] When he relates, after Holinshed, the legend of Martia, wife of King Guitheline, who is said 'to have excelled so much in wisdom as to venture upon a new institution of laws', the story seems so monstrous that he has to rationalize it away. 'In the minority of her son she had the rule; and then, as may be supposed, brought forth those laws, not herself, for laws are masculine births, but by the advice of her sagest counsellors; and therein she might do virtuously, since it befel her to supply the nonage of her son, else nothing more awry from the law of God and nature than that a woman should give laws to men.'[5]

Perhaps the most curious example of Milton's prejudice against women is that afforded by his treatment of Boadicea. Previous historians had regarded the warrior-queen as a national heroine; he represents her merely as a virago, 'a distracted woman with as mad a crew at her heels.' Dion Cassius puts a long speech into Boadicea's mouth, which Holinshed and Speed reproduce at length. Milton

[1] *History of Britain*, p. 272.
[2] Ibid., p. 48.
[3] Ibid., p. 167; cf. p. 82.
[4] Ibid., pp. 22, 60.
[5] Ibid., p. 25.

very properly rejects this oration. 'I affect not set speeches in a history, unless known for certain to have been so spoken in effect as they are written, nor then, unless worth rehearsal; and to invent such, though eloquently, as some historians have done, is an abuse of posterity, raising in them that read other conceptions of those times and persons than were true. Much less, therefore, do I purpose here or elsewhere to copy out tedious orations without decorum, though in their authors composed ready to my hand.'[1] The unseemliness of the oration consists in this, that Dion and also Tacitus put into the mouth of Boadicea, besides 'a deal of other fondness', the statement that 'with the Britons it was usual for a woman to be their leader'. Indignantly Milton observes: 'This they do out of vanity, hoping to embellish and set out their history with the strangeness of our manners, not caring in the meanwhile to brand us with the rankest note of barbarism, as if in Britain women were men and men women.'[2]

Milton's prejudices appear still more strongly and frequently in his references to Church matters. Of set purpose he avoided the ecclesiastical side of British and Saxon history as far as possible, 'not professing to relate of those matters more than what mixes aptly with civil affairs.'[3] The records of political events were often an arid catalogue of names and dates, tragical deaths of princes of whom nothing else was known, and battles without reason or result. 'Such bickerings to recount, met often in these our writers,' complains Milton, 'what more worth is it than to chronicle the wars of kites, or crows flocking and fighting in the air?'[4]

But he deliberately refused to amplify these meagre annals by drawing upon the fund of information which his authorities supplied about the religious life of the times. 'I am sensible how wearisome it may likely be to read of so many and bare and reasonless actions, so many names of kings one after another acting little more than mute persons in a scene. What would it be to have inserted the long bead-roll of archbishops, bishops, abbots, abbesses, and their doings, neither to religion profitable, nor to morality, swelling my authors

[1] *History of Britain*, pp. 65–67. [2] Ibid., p. 66. [3] Ibid., p. 138.

[4] Ibid., p. 184. Hume quotes this: 'The history of that period abounds in names, but is extremely barren of events; or the events related so much without circumstances and causes that the most profound or most eloquent writer must despair of rendering them either instructive or entertaining to the reader. Even the great learning and vigorous imagination of Milton sunk under the weight, and this author scruples not to declare that the skirmishes of the kites or crows as much merited a particular narrative as the confused transactions and battles of the Saxon Heptarchy.'—*History of England*, i. 25.

each to a voluminous body, by me studiously omitted, and left as their propriety, who have a mind to write the ecclesiastical matters of those ages?'[1] The development of a scientific interest in the monuments and institutions of the past was one of the characteristics of seventeenth-century England, but so far as it showed itself in researches into ecclesiastical antiquities Milton took no interest in the movement. He scoffed at men like Dodsworth and Dugdale, 'who take pleasure to be all their lifetime raking the foundations of old abbeys and cathedrals.'[2] Though he professed to distinguish between antiquaries, 'whose labours are useful and laudable,' and 'antiquitarians', that is, 'those that over affect antiquity', and consequently oppose necessary changes in the Church, he evidently thought that all antiquaries tended to become antiquitarians. In his pamphlet *Of Reformation in England* he sneers at Camden as 'a fast friend of episcopacy, who cannot but love bishops as well as old coins and his much lamented monasteries for antiquity's sake'.[3]

Just as Milton failed to appreciate the value of researches into monastic antiquities, so he was insensible to the charm of the monastic legends. He had not hesitated for the sake of the poets to relate Geoffrey of Monmouth's fantastic fictions about the early British kings, but fabulous stories about events which occurred in historic times stood on a different footing. A vision might pass, but no story with a miracle in it should be told in his pages. Legends of martyrs were therefore excluded. Speaking of Alban of Verulam, he says that the story of his martyrdom 'soiled and worse martyred with the fabling zeal of some idle fancies, more fond of miracles than apprehensive of truth, deserves not longer digression'.[4] The secret murder of Kenelm of Mercia was miraculously revealed, 'but to tell how,' says Milton, 'is a long story, though told out of order by Malmesbury, and under the year 821 by Matthew of Westminster, where I leave it to be sought by such as are more credulous than I wish my readers.'[5]

In Milton's attitude scientific incredulity was reinforced by Puritanical abhorrence of popery, and by contempt for the triviality of

[1] *History of Britain*, p. 177. Hume echoes this passage: 'It is almost impossible, and quite needless, to be more particular in relating the transactions of the East Angles. What instruction or entertainment can it give the reader to hear a long bead-roll of barbarous names, Egric, Annas, Ethelbert, Ethelwald, Aldulf, Elfwald, Beorne, Ethelred, Ethelbert, who successively murdered, expelled, or inherited from each other, and obscurely filled the throne of that kingdom?'—i. 40.

[2] Ibid., p. 173.

[3] *Of Reformation in England, Prose Works*, i. 14.

[4] *History of Britain*, p. 88.

[5] Ibid.

ecclesiastical controversy, wherein he anticipates the philosophical historians of the next century. After Augustine had commenced the work of converting the men of Kent, Pope Gregory sent him a supply of fellow labourers. 'What they were,' says Milton, 'may be guessed by the stuff which they brought with them, vessels and vestments for the altar, copes, relics, and for the Archbishop Austin a pall to say mass in; to such a rank superstition that age was grown, though some of them yet retaining an emulation of apostolic zeal.'[1] He is still more contemptuous when, having mentioned the Synod of Whitby, he has to refer to the controversy between the Irish and English clergy about the tonsure. 'Another clerical question was there also much controverted, not so superstitious in my opinion as ridiculous, about the right shaving of crowns.'[2] Of monastic institutions he speaks always with similar contempt, dwelling at length on their worst side and on their decay, never mentioning their services in their prime. 'In the days of Ina,' he relates, 'clerks and laics, men and women hasting to Rome in herds, thought themselves nowhere sure of eternal life till they were cloistered there.' Kings imitated their subjects: if one was 'forcibly shaven a monk', many others of their own free will 'got into a monk's hood'. Kelwulf of Northumberland became a monk in Lindisfarne, 'yet none of the severest,' says Milton, 'for he brought those monks from milk and water to wine and ale; in which doctrine no doubt but they were soon docile, and well might, for Kelwulf brought with him good provision, great treasure and revenues of land, recited by Simeon, yet all under pretence of following (I use the author's words) poor Christ, by voluntary poverty: no marvel then if such applause were given by monkish writers to kings turning monks, and much cunning perhaps used to allure them.'[3] The fruit of this predilection for monkish life was the ruin of Church and State. When at the beginning of the ninth century the Danish storm broke in England, the Saxons were ripe for conquest. They were 'broken with luxury and sloth, either secular or superstitious; for laying aside the exercise of arms, and the study of all virtuous knowledge, some betook themselves to over-worldly or vicious practice, others to religious idleness and solitude, which brought forth nothing but vain and delusive visions; easily perceived such by their commanding of things, either not belonging to the gospel, or utterly forbidden, ceremonies, relics, monasteries, masses, idols; add to these ostentation of alms, got ofttimes by rapine and oppression, or intermixed with violent and lustful deeds,

[1] *History of Britain*, p. 141.
[2] Ibid., p. 162.
[3] Ibid., pp. 172, 173, 176, 180.

sometimes prodigally bestowed as the expiation of cruelty and bloodshed'. Thus religion itself had grown void of sincerity, and the greatest shows of purity had become impure.[1]

There is one omission in Milton's references to ecclesiastical affairs which at first surprises the reader. He does not attack episcopacy. In 1641 he had thought nothing too bad to say of the bishops. 'Most certain it is (as all our stories bear witness) that ever since their coming to the see of Canterbury, for nearly twelve hundred years, to speak of them in general, they have been in England to our souls a sad and doleful succession of illiterate and blind guides; to our purses and goods a wasteful kind of robbers, a perpetual havoc and rapine; to our state a continual hydra of mischief and molestation, the forge of discord and rebellion.'[2] In the *History*, however, Milton is almost completely silent about the bishops. Incidentally he remarks how quickly Augustine and his successors 'stepped up into fellowship of pomp with kings'. On the other hand, he inserts an unexpectedly favourable character of Dunstan: 'a strenuous bishop, zealous without dread of persons, and for aught appears, the best of many ages, if he busied not himself too much in secular affairs.'[3]

Perhaps this absence of attacks on bishops is to be explained by the fact that they were suppressed by the licenser. Toland says: 'The Licensers, those sworn officers to destroy learning, liberty, and good sense, expunged several passages of it, wherein he exposed the superstitious pride and cunning of the popish monks in the Saxon times, but applied by the sagacious Licensers to Charles the Second's bishops.'[4] But the number of attacks upon 'the popish monks' which remain seem to refute the story that such indirect thrusts at Milton's old enemies were struck out. Some remarks against the bishops perhaps disappeared owing to the censorship, but there is a better explanation of their absence. Bishops had been abolished before Milton began to write his *History*. Since 1646 'new presbyter' not 'old priest' had been Milton's mark.[5] In the *History* he used the primitive bishops as a stalking-horse against the Presbyterians. Relating the story that three British bishops who attended the Synod of Rimini in 354 accepted the emperor's offer to pay their expenses rather than the subsidies offered by the brethren, 'esteeming it more honourable to live on the public than

[1] *History of Britain*, p. 190.
[2] *Of Reformation*, *Prose Works*, i. 60.
[3] *History of Britain*, pp. 141, 245.
[4] Toland, *Life of John Milton*, 1699, p. 138.
[5] Sonnet 'On the New Forces of Conscience under the Long Parliament'.

to be obnoxious to any private purse,' he adds the comment: 'doubtless an ingenuous mind, and far above the presbyters of our age; who like well to sit in assembly on the public stipend, but liked not the poverty that caused these to do so.'[1] Under cover of describing after Gildas the vices of the British clergy in the sixth century, he inserts phrases aimed at modern ministers. 'Pastors in name but in deed wolves,' 'seizing on the ministry as a trade, not as a spiritual charge,' 'intent not to feed the flock but to pamper and well line themselves,' who 'keep in awe the superstitious multitude' with 'niceties and trivial points' but 'in true saving knowledge leave them still as gross and stupid as themselves'.[2] Lest there should be any mistake made by his readers, Milton placed at the beginning of Book III a comparison between the state of Britain when the Romans left it and that of England in 1647 and 1648, containing a direct denunciation of the self-seeking of the divines of the Westminster Assembly and their demand for compulsion in matters of conscience.[3]

This great digression shows how impossible it was for Milton to avoid referring to the problems of the present when he was writing about the events of the past. To utter freely what he felt about 'so dear a concernment' as his country's weal was a necessity of his nature. Just as Carlyle was obliged to suspend his study of Cromwell in order to express in *Past and Present* his feelings about the condition of England in 1843, so Milton interrupted his *History of Britain* in order to say what he thought about the condition of England in 1648. As the Civil War drew towards its close, the result of 'all this waste of wealth and loss of blood' became doubtful. In the two years of confusion which followed, no stable settlement was attained, and it seemed as if none was attainable. The king had been practically set aside, but the Parliament seemed unable to govern. To Milton, England appeared to be in the position of Britain when the Roman rule ended. When the Romans left the country, the Britons 'thus relinquished, and by all right the government relapsing into their own hands, thenceforth betook themselves to live after their own laws.' But they failed to erect a stable government. 'They seemed awhile to bestir themselves with a show of diligence in their new affairs, some secretly aspiring to rule, others adoring the name of liberty, yet so soon as they felt by proof the weight of what it was to govern well themselves, and

[1] *History of Britain*, p. 90. He refers to this again in *The Likeliest Means to remove Hirelings out of the Church*, *Prose Works*, iii. 376.

[2] *History of Britain*, p. 129.

[3] Ibid., p. 100; *Prose Works*, ed. Mitford, iii. 94–101.

what was wanting in them, not stomach or the love of licence, but the wisdom, the virtue, the labour to use and maintain true liberty, they soon remitted their heat, and shrunk more wretchedly under the burden of their own liberty than before under a foreign yoke.'[1] England now was in a similar condition. Fortune seemed 'to have put liberty so long desired like a bride into their hands'. The faults of the Britons 'brought those ancient natives to misery and ruin by liberty, which rightly used might have made them happy', as the faults of the English had brought them now, 'after many labours, much bloodshed and vast expense, to ridiculous frustration.'[2]

What were the causes of this failure? When the Long Parliament met the people chose to represent them 'such as they thought best affected to the public good'. Some were men of wisdom and integrity, but the greater part merely of men of wealth or ambition. These last, 'when their superficial zeal was spent,' betook themselves every one to follow his own ends. Justice was delayed and denied; spite and favour determined all; everywhere there was wrong and oppression. The members shared offices, gifts, and preferments amongst themselves; instead of enacting good laws they did nothing but impose new taxes; instead of paying the just debts of the State they cheated its creditors.[3] Fearful of being called to account, they fomented fresh troubles and invented new business in order to avoid the necessity of laying down their authority.

Religion was in as bad a plight as the State. The Westminster Assembly had been selected to reform the Church. Its members, after crying down pluralists and non-residents, had become pluralists and non-residents themselves. They called as loudly for compulsion in matters of religion against others as they had complained of it when exercised against themselves, and strove to set up a spiritual tyranny by the aid of the secular power. Seeing the incapacity of their statesmen, the people became disaffected, and seeing the hypocrisy of their ministers, they ceased to believe in religion.

'Thus,' continues Milton, 'they who of late were extolled as our greatest deliverers, and had the people wholly at their devotion, by so discharging their trust as we see, did not only weaken and unfit

[1] *History of Britain*, p. 100. Milton elsewhere refers to this period to prove that British kings were elected by the people, and could be deposed by them. See p. 107, and *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, *Prose Works*, ii. 472.

[2] The ridiculousness of failure to maintain freedom after such efforts to gain it is in 1660 the keynote of Milton's *Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth*, when the position resembled that in 1648. *Prose Works*, iii. 425.

[3] Compare Milton's Sonnet to Fairfax, written in August 1648.

themselves to be dispensers of what liberty they pretended, but unfitted also the people, now grown worse and more disordinate, to receive or digest any liberty at all. For stories teach us, that liberty sought out of season, in a corrupt and degenerate age, brought Rome itself into a farther slavery: for liberty hath a sharp and double edge, fit only to be handled by just and virtuous men; to bad and dissolute, it becomes a mischief unwieldy in their own hands: neither is it completely given, but by them who have the happy skill to know what is grievance and unjust to a people, and how to remove it wisely; what good laws are wanting, and how to frame them substantially, that good men may enjoy the freedom which they merit, and the bad the curb which they need. But to do this, and to know these exquisite proportions, the heroic wisdom which is required surmounted far the principles of these narrow politicians: what wonder then if they sunk as these unfortunate Britons before them, entangled and oppressed with things too hard and generous above their strain and temper?'[1]

Then, having stated the causes of this failure, Milton explained the cure. Englishmen, 'to speak a truth not often spoken,' were not born statesmen. England was a land 'fruitful enough of men stout and courageous in war', but at the same time 'not over-fertile naturally of men able to govern wisely and prudently in peace'. The national character was in fault: it was rude, intractable and unteachable—he almost says unintelligent. Public spirit and similar qualities 'grow not here but in minds well implanted with solid and elaborate breeding'. Just as certain products must be imported to our island from sunnier lands, 'so must ripe understanding and many civil virtues be imported into our minds from foreign writings and examples of best ages.' If England was to succeed in great enterprises she must have men with the education of statesmen to conduct her affairs—not politicians 'trusting only in their mother wit' or tradesmen 'called from shops and warehouses to sit in supreme councils', but 'men more than vulgar, bred up in the knowledge of ancient and illustrious deeds'.

Here Milton's tract *Of Education* and his *History of Britain* explain each other. When he wrote in 1644 that the reforming of education was a thing 'for the want whereof this nation perishes', he did not mean that England was perishing for want of scholars, but for want of statesmen. His imaginary pupils were from the first to be 'stirred up with high hopes of living to be brave men and worthy patriots, dear to God and famous to all ages', and in the end

[1] *Mr. John Milton's Character of the Long Parliament*, p. 9.

to be fit 'to perform justly, skilfully, and magnanimously all the offices, both private and public, of peace and war'. Thus to qualify them, one of their studies must be the study of politics. They should be taught to know 'the beginning, end, and reasons of political societies; that they may not, in a dangerous fit of the commonwealth, be such poor, shaken, uncertain reeds, of such a tottering conscience, as many of our great counsellors have lately shown themselves, but steadfast pillars of the State'.[1]

'Choice histories' were also to be put into their hands, and in the *History of Britain* Milton explains what he conceived to be the practical value of his national history to a statesman. It could teach him to understand the character of his countrymen in its strength and weakness. By comparing the past and present, we can 'raise a knowledge of ourselves both great and weighty', and judge what we are able to achieve. 'For if it be a high point of wisdom in every private man, much more is it in a nation, to know itself, rather than puffed up with vulgar flatteries and encomiums, for want of self-knowledge, to enterprise rashly and come off miserably in great undertakings.'[2]

With the exception of the first paragraph, the whole of this long digression was omitted when Milton published his *History* in 1670. The passage was published in 1681, after his death, under the title of *Mr. John Milton's Character of the Long Parliament and the Assembly of Divines.* According to the publisher, Mr. Milton had intended the 'Character' to be printed in his *History*, 'but out of tenderness to a party (whom neither this nor much more lenity has had the luck to oblige) it was struck out for some harshness, being only such a digression as the *History* itself would not be discomposed by its omission.'[3]

Yet, while the suppressed passage is undoubtedly Milton's, and is correctly placed at the beginning of the third book, the explanation given of its omission is obviously absurd. The publisher recommended it as 'very seasonable for these times', and it would have been equally seasonable in 1670. It was printed now as a controversial weapon against the Presbyterians and the Nonconformists, and it could have been printed eleven years earlier for the same reason. For there was no thought in 1670 of any tenderness towards that party, as the

[1] *Prose Works*, ii. 384, 385, 388.

[2] *History of Britain*, p. 100. Of the digression there remains in the text thirteen lines on p. 99 and eleven and a half on the next page. The rest was omitted.

[3] Masson, *Life of Milton*, pp. 806–7.

passing of the second Conventicle Act in that year proved. Any licenser would have welcomed the denunciation of the Assembly of Divines as a powerful argument in favour of the policy of the king's government.

The most reasonable explanation is that Milton suppressed the passage himself. All had changed since 1648. The Assembly of Divines was a thing of the past, and its survivors were now persecuted rather than persecutors. The Long Parliament had come to an end: obscurity, or captivity, or the scaffold had been the fate of its leaders, and Milton was more inclined to lament their sufferings than to point out their trespasses or omissions in the day of their power. Englishmen themselves, instead of attempting the high enterprise of erecting a free state, had contentedly relapsed into their old servitude. Milton, therefore, whilst retaining the suggested parallel between the condition of the Britons in the fifth century and that of the English at the close of the first civil war, eliminated the application to the politics of 1648. It had lost all practical utility.

Yet since all history should 'instruct and benefit them that read', the moral of the whole story should be made plain.[1] Poet or historian, Milton was ever a preacher, and used British history for the purpose of edification just as he would have used his British epic. To his eyes the significance of the revolutions he had related was clear. Each successive conquest of Britain was a just judgement on the conquered race. The Britons were mere barbarians, 'progenitors not to be gloried in,' naturally and deservedly subdued by the Romans. Roman civilization served but to prepare them for bondage. Freedom made them worse instead of better, till 'scarce the least footstep or impression of goodness was left remaining through all ranks and degrees in the land; except in some so very few as hardly to be visible in a general corruption.'[2] Hence 'the many miseries and desolations brought by a divine hand on a perverse nation; driven, when nothing else could reform them, out of a fair country into a mountainous and barren corner by strangers and pagans. So much more tolerable in the eye of heaven is infidelity professed than Christian faith and religion dishonoured by unchristian works.'[3] By the ninth century 'the Saxons were full as wicked as the Britons were at their arrival'. They fell before the Danes because God purposed 'to punish our instrumental punishers, though now Christians, by other heathen, according to His divine retaliation, invasion for invasion, spoil for spoil, destruction for destruction'.

[1] *History of Britain*, p. 3.
[2] Ibid., pp. 49, 71, 108, 128.
[3] Ibid., p. 134.

Vain had been the union of the seven kingdoms under one rule, for 'when God hath decreed servitude on a sinful nation, fitted by their own vices for no condition but servile, all estates of government are alike unable to avoid it'.[1]

Such, too, were the causes of the Norman Conquest. By their vices the English had 'fitted themselves for this servitude'. The clergy had 'lost all good literature and religion'; the great men were 'given to gluttony and dissolute life'; the meaner sort 'spent all they had in drunkenness. . . . Some few of all sorts were much better among them; but such was the generality.' And as the long-suffering of God 'permits bad men to enjoy prosperous days with the good, so His severity ofttimes exempts not good men from their share in evil times with the bad'.

It remained only to apply this moral to the present moment, and to warn the England of Charles II. Milton does this in the last sentence of his *History*, added evidently in 1670: 'If these were the causes of such misery and thraldom to our ancestors, with what better close can be concluded, than here in fit season to remember this age in the midst of her security, to fear from like vices, without amendment, the revolution of like calamities.'[2]

[1] *History of Britain*, p. 190.

[2] The inseparable connexion between liberty and virtue was the fundamental doctrine of Milton's political pamphlets as well as his *History*, and he emphasized it both in *Paradise Lost* and in *Paradise Regained*. Men, explains the Archangel Michael to Adam, lost their inward freedom when they allowed their passions to 'catch the government from reason', and the loss of their outward freedom followed. It was so with nations too.

> 'Sometimes nations will decline so low
> From virtue, which is freedom, that no wrong
> But Justice, and some fatal curse annext
> Deprives them of their outward liberty,
> Their inward lost.'

Nor was it possible to deliver them. 'Who can of inward slaves make outward free?' replies Christ to the Tempter.

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